

# THE EVOLUTION AND EXPERIENCE OF URBAN POLICY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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## SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE

### *The nature of urban policy*

The development of most urban areas is influenced, to some degree, by the processes of urban policy and urban planning. Urban policy and planning are generally concerned with the management of urban areas. They are state activities that seek to influence the distribution and operation of investment and consumption processes in cities for the 'common good'. However it is important to recognise that urban policy is not confined to activity at the urban scale. National and international economic and social policies are as much urban policy, if defined by their urban impacts, as is land-use planning or urban redevelopment. In effect, urban policy is often made under another name. Urban policy and planning are thus dynamic activities whose formulation and interpretation are a continuing process. Measures introduced cause changes that may resolve some problems but create others, for which further policy and planning are required. Furthermore, only rarely is there a simple, optimum solution to an urban problem. More usually a range of policy and planning options exist from which an informed choice must be made

Urban policy is also the product of the power relation between the different interest groups that constitute a particular society. Foremost among these agents are government (both local and national) and capital in its various fractions. Capital and government pursue specific goals that may be either complementary or contradictory. These political and economic imperatives have a direct influence on the nature of urban policy. Urban policy is also conditioned by external forces operating within the global system, as well as by locality-specific factors and agents. It would also be fair

to conclude that urban policy making is the product of a continuous interaction of intellectual process and institutional response; a process driven by successive sets of powerful, and relatively consistent, value judgements which have a profound influence on how urban problems are defined, and on the policies derived to deal with them.

*Urban policy in the developing world: influential waves of international research*

Under the sponsorship of the World Bank who, as Rogerson (1989) writes, recognised that urbanisation problems in the developing world had reached proportions warranting serious consideration in overall national development policies, and that the formulation of coherent national urban policies was undeveloped in most African, Asian and Latin American countries, a first wave of research in the early 1980's argued that national urban policies should be conceived as a sub-group of national spatial strategies primarily directed at urban rather than rural settlements. The objectives of national urban policy were viewed as multi-dimensional in character even if a few explicit goals might be stressed. Furthermore, due to the geographical concentration of investments (in urban areas) and the high costs of urban infrastructure, a set of national urban policy goals were often framed in terms such as slowing the growth of the primate city, strengthening intermediate cities or minimising urban-rural migration. The tendency to specify explicit spatial goals as the prime objective of national urban policy was severely criticised. Rather, in seeking objectives for national urban policy, it was essential to acknowledge that such goals could not be "ends in themselves but are the means to achieve the general aims of society" (Richardson 1983, cited in Rogerson, 1989). Therefore spatial objectives, for example slowing down the growth of the primate city or minimising rural-urban migration, were seen as only having merit as sub-goals in achieving higher-level societal goals. This view therefore posited that the core objectives for national urban policy were the same as those of general national economic and social policies, and included *inter alia* the promotion of economic growth and efficiency, improving equity and reducing poverty, satisfying basic human needs for all, and preserving environmental quality. As Rogerson (1989) points out further, a number of influential studies at the time agreed that it would not be advisable to set goals for national urban policy that could be measured solely in quantitative terms, such as limits to population growth or targets for individual cities and regions. The overall policy goal would be to attain an optimal settlement pattern that maximises real income for people, regardless of where they reside. In terms of the actual form of national policy,

this body of work emphasised the inherent danger of assuming that a general strategy would be applicable to all developing economies. Instead, country uniqueness was emphasised and a typology of urban development strategies subsequently emanated.

In the late 1980's, a second wave of research began to question the value of direct location instruments in national urban policy, strongly arguing that indirect mechanisms may be more appropriate, and de-emphasising spatial considerations in favour of a 'space-blind' policy which becomes a key component of overall economic and development planning. The observation is made by a number of scholars that little evidence exists to support the view that experiments with national urban policy conducted from the mid-1970's to the mid-1980's (including those embracing the framework described as the first wave of research) have been successful. The most common explanation for the poor performance of national urban policies across the developing world is seen to be the separation of national urban policy from the national economic planning process and from the overall context of macro-economic and sectoral policies. In other words, in most developing economies, national urban policy was often implemented in abstraction from overall development strategies, with very little synergy between the two processes. National urban policy was generally treated as a narrow sectoral responsibility for which a national line ministry had overall responsibility. There was consequently little integration between urban development policy and development planning in general. The urban system was moulded independently of other policies, resulting in a failure to recognise the powerful spatial impress exerted by macro-economic forces on the pace of urbanisation and the form and functioning of the urban system. In sum, independently conceived spatial policy, for example those still fixated with the 'primacy' problem', still had strong resonance (Richardson, 1987).

#### *The African experience: a cursory overview*

The experience of African countries in formulating and implementing urban policy over the last two and a half decades has been haphazard. Urban growth has taken place exceedingly rapidly, with all evidence suggesting that urban populations will continue to grow much faster than rural populations even if the urban bias in development strategies were reversed. While the rate of the continent's growth may be lower than other regions - due primarily to Africa's marginalisation in terms of trade, investment and infrastructure development (Halfani, 1996) - and theories

about a slowdown in the rate of growth of some of the largest cities and of polarisation reversal or spatial deconcentration into polycentric metropolitan forms (Pacione, 2005), the fact of the matter is that Africa is becoming increasingly urbanised. What is therefore needed, argues Hope (2001), is the development and implementation of appropriate national urbanisation strategies, influenced from country to country by the economic, social, political and cultural characteristics that exists within each. Or, as the point has been made above, a set of strategies that takes into account the uniqueness and distinctiveness of the nation states, and indeed cities, in question.

Now while urban policy alternatives (see above section) were available over the last two decades with which urban policy makers in the developing world could experiment with, the urban situation in Africa has made it exceedingly difficult to implement a uniform set of policy precepts, so that at any given time a range of interventions seemed to co-exist, from spatially explicit urban policies in some parts of the continent, to more 'space' blind' initiatives elsewhere, to yet a combination of the two in others. Perhaps the exception has been Kenya where national urban policy, instead of being treated as a self-contained area of policy making (explicit spatial policy intervention to restructure the national urban system), has more recently rejected the premise that the urban system can be thought of independent of other policies and has recognised the formidable spatial impress that macro-economic forces exert on the pace of urbanisation and the structure and operational efficiency of the Kenyan urban system. The point made by Evan's (1989) here is that national urban policy in Kenya is no longer concentrated on the form and pattern of the urban system, in the context of a postulated end-state; rather the urban settlement system is viewed largely as an outgrowth of the macro-economic policy context.

The unique and differing situation among African cities which, as pointed out above, has historically made it difficult to implement a set of policy principles in any sustainable maner, results from a range of spatial and demographic factors. Three are worth mentioning here. Firstly, definitions of urban and rural vary widely across Africa. Many African countries use a population size of 2000 as the cut-off between rural and urban settlements. However, the figure varies from 100 in Uganda to 20 000 in Nigeria and Mauritius. Almost half the countries in Africa use a numerical definition to indicate the areas that qualify as urban (UNCHS Habitat, 2002). The second has to do with the different patterns of urbanisation in West and East Africa.

In many West African countries there are few secondary cities, resulting in the population being concentrated in one or a few large cities. Population growth in East Africa is more evenly distributed over secondary and tertiary cities. But there, also, primary cities are going through a period of rapid growth. The patterns of urbanisation in North and Southern (especially South) Africa have also been in stark contrast (Pillay, 2004). Thirdly, while an older body of literature has often described a general model of the African city based on the existence of an indigenous core, and the distribution of different ethnic groups according to density gradients which assigned low-density land-use to the administrative and residential requirements of the colonial elites and high-density to indigenous populations, the situation in most African cities at present is hardly analogous. Post-colonial transformations of African cities, characterised by a greater mixing of economic and residential land uses, has resulted in a variety of forms (Pacione, 2005), underscoring the point made above that any set of urban development strategies has got to factor in the unique and distinctive spatial morphology inherent in most African cities, as well as a parallel set of complex institutional and political arrangements.

### *South Africa*

#### *(i) an overview*

Urban policy pre-1994 in South Africa was based predominantly on the dictates of apartheid spatial planning, with the precise form of the South African city being codified by the 1950 Group Areas Act and the notion of segregated urban space. It is little wonder, therefore, that current urban policy is founded on an intention to re-integrate cities, and move towards more compact urban forms. As Todes (2000) has observed, visions akin to the urbanist ideals of Jane Jacobs (1961) offering opportunities for higher-density living, proximity between home and work, land use mix, and social integration are prevalent. Alternative discourse of city development emerged as planners and urban scholars mounted a huge critique of urban apartheid. Less divided urban forms were proposed in an integrated city and co-ordinated development framework. Negotiated during the inclusive forum processes that characterised South Africa's transitional period (Pillay, 2004) and endorsed, as Todes (2000) goes on to reveal, by neo-liberal technocratic bodies such as the Urban Foundation (1990) and World Bank (1991); these ideas soon became the dominant discourse, and were effectively embodied in legislation by the new government. As Pieterse (2004) has remarked, urban integration was seen as providing the ultimate

panacea to the many intractable problems that mark South Africa's cities, emerging strongly in the 'recently' published Draft White Paper on Urbanisation, and prior to that at the core of government's 1997 Urban Development Framework (UDF). Harrison et al (2003) note cautiously, however, that there is real and growing concern that government's 'neo-liberal' (market orientated) turn may be exacerbating social and class divides, and may be prioritising South Africa's standing in the global economy at the expense of its poorest citizens. Robinson (1998) has argued too that such a technocratic discourse could become another oppressive form of urban ordering – a physicalist meta-narrative imposing a single moral view of the good city, a sentiment strongly echoed by Bond (2003) who has argued that the core characteristics of post-apartheid urban policy resulted, through unintended effects, in an equally oppressive structured process that can be termed *class apartheid*. As a result, he goes on to elaborate, a variety of specific problems associated with apartheid-era urban under-development continued – and were in many cases exacerbated – during the late 1990s and into the twenty first century. In sum then, a growing body of literature has begun to argue that compaction-integration appears to offer little to the urban poor, especially those on the periphery of the city and, in the context of a larger emphasis on development local government and more recently a powerful discourse on cities and global competitiveness, new urban policy formulations are seen to be worthy of investigation.

This is not to gainsay the importance of compaction-integration strategies in opening up a wider variety of spaces and opportunities. Indeed, locations close to areas of employment, economic opportunities, facilities and services is still significant for large groups of people. As Todes (2000) has observed, this debate has helped to avoid gross peripheralisation of the urban poor, and brought questions of accessibility to the fore. Additionally, it has focused attention on the need to reconstruct township and informal areas, and does in part weaken old divides. Pieterse (2003) has noted that perhaps the problem has less to do with integration as a strategy *per se* and that outcome failures need to be seen against the deeper problem of weak conceptual anchoring of the policy objectives and instruments, especially the failure to deal with divergent and conflictual interests in the city. We would also venture to add here, contrary to what the second wave of international research on urban policy in the developing world has had to say, that part of the problem may have to do with the fact that instead of semi-autonomously nurturing a desired form of the urban system that was robustly conceived in the early 1990s, policy makers have since subjugated the urban system to support the larger goal of accelerated economic growth which,

while generating relative macro-economic stability, has to a large degree failed to generate positive micro-economic developmental and employment advances. In other words, national urban policy goals may have been too embedded in overall development strategies and macro- and sectoral- planning.

Ten years into democracy, the fact remains that a set of sustainable urban policies that talk to the multiple and competing demands and challenges of our cities has yet to emerge. While positive inroads have been made, institutional fragmentation, competing discourses on development, limited policy and programme capacity at a local level, a lack of rigorous research in the preparation of policy, and the temptation to invoke international best practice solutions in the reconstruction of our cities, has meant that we are at present, if not operating in a total policy void, reconfiguring our cities through 'policy' trajectories devoid of meaningful substance and content. It is a matter that needs urgent redress if the twin – and mutually reinforcing - concerns of growth and equity are to find expression in a newly formulated vision of the South African city.

### **The Book itself**

A number of books about urban South Africa have been published since the democratic elections in 1994. Their central themes have concerned housing backlogs, policy and delivery, the apartheid city and how the delivery of housing is contributing to urban fragmentation, and governance issues. There have also been a large number of publications on cities, most especially on Johannesburg. These books have generally been the product of geographers and planners and one finds in their titles 'fragmentation', 'divided', 'shaping', 'unsustainable' and 'crisis'. 'Post-apartheid', of course, rings most loudly, with a crescendo of journal articles looking at urban South Africa not in terms of its preferred future but in terms of its despised past.

Government has presented issues a bit differently. The conception of the future was defined in the Reconstruction and Development Programme by meeting basic human needs, in the 1996 Constitution through giving affect to Social Rights and in the 1998 White Paper on Local Government as a 'historic opportunity to transform local government'. It is this sense of opportunity and, indeed, enthusiasm and optimism that underlay the preparation of urban policies in the early years, starting with local

government negotiations and in 1992 with the National Housing Forum. The policies were prepared in great haste and driven by political agendas for the future.

The urban policies were at the same time simplistic and complex. They were simplistic in setting targets for delivery whose realisation required ignoring other development criteria; a million houses in five years being the notorious example of a numerical goal overriding the need to build sustainable settlements. They were complex in the transformation of local government and the need to align boundary demarcation, institutional restructuring, financial and fiscal direction and resources, all with a view to building democratic and developmental institutions.

A little has been written about the process of policy formulation and the research and other influences that underlay it, with the focus shifting from housing and urban form to governance and service delivery. There has not been a comprehensive assessment of the urban policies formulated during the first ten years of democracy and the process of formulating the policies and the influences on them. It is this services which is provided by this book.

The process of urban policy formulation covered in this book begins with the 1976 Soweto uprising, pays attention to the intense struggles in the townships during the 1980s, and then proceeds to a close examination of prominent urban policies and policy formulation and implementation during the 1990s and on to 2004. In 2004 South Africa celebrated ten years of democracy.

There have been three components to urban policy in South Africa up to 2004. Policies to which close attention has been paid include those that gave affect to the 'One city, one tax base' slogan that emerged during the township struggles. These policies included re-demarcating municipalities to create integrated and democratic local governments, the comprehensive restructuring of the local government system, and the design of municipal financial systems that support service delivery to the poor. Another set of policies revolves around the creation of 'developmental local governments' and include integrated development planning and local economic development. A last set of policies refers to the mass delivery of free housing and services within municipalities.

In effect, the national, provincial (in the case of housing) and municipal and sectoral policies included in this book have sought to *enable* local government to undertake



delivery, *plan for delivery* and *implement delivery* in consolidating democracy. Thus, government's urban policy has focused on meeting the commitment in the Reconstruction and Development Programme to provide for the basic needs of all South Africans and building democratic local government institutions and enhancing their ability to promote socio-economic development in urban areas.

A further section of the book is devoted to a chapter on urban spatial policy and another on the absence of an urbanisation policy and present policies that are having unintended consequences for urbanisation. These two chapters provide both a contextual introduction to the book and point to the absence of policies that effectively counter a century of efforts to prevent the urbanisation of the African population.

Most of the urban policies have been debated and evaluated, but there has not been an attempt to document the history of the policy formulation processes in relation to experience with the policies and subsequent revisions to the policies. This book serves this purpose; with the intention also being to evaluate the influence of research, advice from international development agencies and comparative experience, and political and economic pressures during the policy formulation processes. The focus is essentially on the sphere of government where policy is "passed" (national), and the sphere of government most responsible for implementation (municipal).